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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of imaginary companions consistently have found a relation between the incidence of these "fantastical friends" and children's birth order. Unsuccessful attempts to link imaginary companion formation to child characteristics may be due to researchers' treatment of these friends as a form of pretend play rather than as a distinct relationship for the child. This study investigated the relationship qualities and form of imaginary companions (invisible friends or personified objects) to potentially explain why children form these imaginary relationships. Mothers of 78 children--24 with invisible friends (IF's), 21 with personified objects (PO's), and 33 controls matched on age and gender--were interviewed. Chi-square analyses replicated the relation between incidence and birth order, that is, that children with imaginary companions were more likely to be first born or only children and to have fewer siblings than children without companions. The distinction between the two forms (IF and PO) related to different types of relationships and differences in the children's dramatic play. Findings suggest that in future research, the form the imaginary companion takes should be distinguished because IF's and PO's appear to furnish different types of relationships for the child. (HTH)

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Invisible friends and personified objects: Qualitative differences in relationships with imaginary companions

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Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, DC (April, 1997).

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Abstract

Previous studies of imaginary companions only consistently find a relation between the incidence of these fantastical friends and children's birth order. Unsuccessful attempts to link imaginary companion formation to child characteristics may be due to researchers' treatment of these friends as a form of pretend play rather than as a distinct relationship for the child. This study investigates the relationship qualities and form of imaginary companions (invisible friends or personified objects) to potentially explain why children form these imaginary relationships. Mothers of 78 children (24 with invisible friends (IFs), 21 with personified objects (POs), and 33 controls matched on age and gender) were interviewed. Chi-square analyses replicated the relation between incidence and birth order. The distinction between the two forms (IF and PO) related to different types of relationships and differences in the children's dramatic play. In future research, the form the imaginary companion takes should be distinguished because IFs and POs appear to furnish different types of relationships for the child.

Introduction

Many preschool children have a relationship with an imaginary companion but little empirical research explains why some children form them and others do not. Past research has viewed this phenomenon as simply a complex form of dramatic play or imagination, which could perhaps explain the paucity of child or social environment characteristics that relate to imaginary companion formation. Possibly, ignoring the qualities of these imaginary relationships has obscured the reasons for their formation.

Explanations of imaginary companion formation have been further masked by variations in the criteria researchers use to identify them. Definitions of imaginary companions have varied from including only invisible friends (IFs) to including invisible friends and personified objects (POs), such as dolls or stuffed animals, in the same category. The distinction between IFs and POs is unexplored. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of relationship qualities and form (IF versus PO) in the creation of imaginary companions, and to uncover individual differences between children with and without imaginary companions in terms of child characteristics and propensity for dramatic play.

Methods

Parents were solicited for participation if their child had had an imaginary companion for one month or more, or if their child did not have an imaginary companion but matched on age and gender with a child who did have a companion. Subjects included 78 parents of preschool children (45 girls, 33 boys) from 2 University child care facilities serving mostly white offspring of married couples. Participants were classified into 3 groups according to companion type:

Invisible Friends (IFs): n=24; 12 girls and 12 boys.

Personified Objects (POs) n=21, 15 girls and 6 boys

Controls (children without imaginary companions) n=33, 18 girls and 15 boys

Through extended interviews, parents provided information on the children's background, number of imaginary companions, and play. Background included such information as the child's age, gender, birth order, number of siblings, ethnicity, and whether or not the child had friends. For children with imaginary companions, parents responded to questions on the child's relationship with the imaginary companion including behaviors, interactions, and the role the companion played in the child's life. Information was also obtained as to the companion's physical characteristics (e.g., human or animal), and people in the child's life who were acquainted with the companion. Variables on play included parents' ratings of their children as spending little or a great deal of time in fantasy play (3 point scale) and the length of time fantasy play bouts lasted.

Results

Incidence

Approximately 19% of the families willing to participate (N=128) had a child with an invisible companion. Approximately 16% had a child with a personified object.

Demographics and Background Variables

Children with and without imaginary companions did not differ significantly on any demographic or background variables with two related exceptions. Children with imaginary companions were more likely to be first born or only children compared to controls $\chi^2(6, 78)=15.1$, $p < .003$. Children with imaginary companions had significantly fewer siblings than control children $t(76)= -4.07$, $p < .001$. Children with invisible friends versus personified objects

did not differ according to birth order, although a trend indicated that children with invisible friends may be more likely to be firstborns or only children χ^2 (6, 78)=3.40, $p < .065$.

Invisible Friends versus Personified Objects: Descriptions and Relationship Qualities

IFs and POs differed significantly in several different ways (see Table 1). In terms of their manifestations, IFs were more often human and POs nonhuman (primarily animal) χ^2 (5, 45)=13.76, $p=.017$. In addition, children with IFs typically had multiple companions, whereas POs were more often single χ^2 (1, 45)=6.79, $p=.009$.

Relationships and behavior with these different types of companions appeared to vary as well. Relationships with IFs were typically horizontal (e.g., friendships) whereas those with POs were typically vertical (e.g., parent-child relationships) where the child was dominant χ^2 (3, 45)=7.88, $p=.049$. Children with POs more frequently demonstrated care-taking of their imaginary companions than did children with IFs χ^2 (1, 45)=13.94, $p < .0002$.

The role the companion played in the child's life differed according to form. IFs were unknown to other children, present in few of the child's social contexts, and did not participate in the child's daily routines. POs were known to other children, present in multiple social contexts and involved in daily routines $p \leq .05$. Lastly, regardless of type, mothers reported little or no conflict in their children's relationships with imaginary companions.

Play-Related Variables

All three groups differed from each other in patterns of frequency of role play. Children with POs were most likely to be reported by their mothers as engaging in a high frequency of role play, and reports of children without imaginary companions were evenly distributed between high, medium and low frequency of role play χ^2 (4, 45)=10.21, $p=.037$. (See Figure 1.)

Discussion

Consistent with past research, children with imaginary companions were more likely to be first born or only children and to have fewer siblings than children without companions. Separating the companions into invisible friends and personified objects revealed two patterns of companion formation. Invisible friends functioned as peers, in that these relationships were typically horizontal and with humans. Although often present in pairs or groups, invisible friends were prevalent in few aspects of a child's life and were only well-known to people in the child's immediate family and other close adults. Relationships with personified objects, on the other hand, were typically vertical, in that the child nurtured the companion. Frequently stuffed animals, these single companions accompanied the child in varied social contexts and were well-known to most people who knew the child, including other children.

Several implications of imaginary companion distinctions emerged as a result of this research. The findings suggest that caution should be taken before grouping these relationships under the all-encompassing category of 'imaginary companion'. The differential nature of the relationships children have with invisible friends versus personified objects suggests that the two types serve different functions and thus may be different phenomena entirely. The meaning of this distinction is emphasized by the fact that children with personified objects were reported to engage more frequently in role play and symbolic play (e.g., with dolls, stuffed animals, or figures besides their personified object) than children with invisible friends. Perhaps creating a personified object is more closely related to dramatic play, whereas invisible friends provide a solitary forum for the rehearsal of social skills and a controllable relationship.

Table 1

Typical Companion Types

Relationship Quality	Invisible Friend	Personified Object
Configuration	Multiple	Single
Manifestation	Human	Animal
Relationship orientation	Horizontal (e g , friendship)	Vertical (e g , caretaking)
Caretaking of companion	Infrequent	Frequent
Situational diversity	Low/Medium	Medium/High
Who knows about companion?	Family, other close adults	Family, close adults, children
Participation in daily routines	No	Yes

Figure 1. Frequency of Role Play